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Official business: Forte makes quick ascent to NBA

Brian Forte's welcome-to-the-NBA moment didn't come the day he got the call telling him that he'd been promoted to the pros. Nor did it come when he took the court in Charlotte to officiate the Bobcats' season opener against the Milwaukee Bucks in November 2007.

No, Forte, a 1999 Furman graduate, officially arrived on pro basketball's biggest stage on February 28, 2008, late in the third quarter of the Los Angeles Lakers' blowout of the SuperSonics in Seattle. With his team up 31, Lakers star Kobe Bryant went for a rebound and took exception to a non-call by Forte.

A few seconds of jawing later, Bryant was doing one of the few things he'd yet to do on a basketball court — walking to the locker room after being ejected.

When the best player in the world gets tossed for the first time, that's big news. It's even bigger news when the guy who did it is a rookie.

Brian Forte was suddenly a famous man — not always good news for a sports referee.

Pro-Laker bloggers ripped into him. And in the post-game press conference, Lakers coach Phil Jackson accused Forte of having a short temper — then delivered a more biting blow by calling Forte "Junior" and suggesting that he had his job only because his father, Joe, is a 20-year NBA referee.

It was a long way from officiating rowdy intramural games at the Furman PAC. But now that the dust has settled, Forte says the Bryant situation was a valuable lesson.

"It was certainly an interesting situation for somebody in their first year. It was a good learning situation," he says. "I think Kobe felt he was right and what happened, happened. The neat thing about Kobe and our players is that each night's a new night."

And that's what really matters for Forte (Fore-tay), whose meteoric rise through the

officiating ranks, with all due respect to Jackson, is attributable to his work ethic and natural feel for one of the toughest jobs in sports. Owen McFadden, director of recreational sports at Furman, must have sensed as much (or been very desperate) when he didn't hesitate to send Forte out on the court just days after Forte showed up in his office looking for a job.

"He put me in the playoffs, and it was the second game I ever worked. I don't know if he knew if I knew anything about officiating or not," Forte says. "We had a couple of fraternities playing, and we had a fight, and from that point on I was really drawn to it. It was exciting, man."

Hooked, Forte began working high school games, and after graduation he moved to the lower levels of college competition. Within a few years he was doing Southeastern Conference games, then the NCAA tournament.

His ultimate goal was the professional ranks. When he was hired by the NBA to work in its developmental league, he once again set himself apart. But when he heard he was being promoted, he was taken aback.

As for that first game in Charlotte, he says, "I was very nervous. In fact, I think everything started to slow down for me going into the third quarter. The first two were such a blur."

Forte had never considered following in his father's footsteps until he decided to give up baseball at Furman after two seasons. But once he made the move, his father was there whenever he needed him.

"He's obviously my biggest mentor," says Forte, a computing-business major at Furman. "When I started, hardly a game went by that I didn't talk to him afterwards. There was a lot of teaching and a lot of advice."

And while he expected the NBA to be difficult, he was still surprised by how challenging



Brian Forte tries to reason with an irritated Yao Ming.

COURTESY NBA PHOTOS

the job was. "Every single night is the top players in the world," he says. "It's very draining, mentally as well as physically. You just don't see in every other level the speed in the NBA and the things our players can do athletically."

Still, Forte had his feet under him a little more firmly when camp opened September 20 in preparation for his second season. Experience will help, as will the perspective offered by his new wife, Jennifer, a third-year law student in Atlanta, where they live in the off-season.

And then there's knowing that he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

"Some nights things are said that bother you, but you have to remember that you're dealing with players and coaches that are trying to win games," he says. "Every night that I walked on the floor, it was a great feeling to know that I had achieved something I had worked years and years on."

— RON WAGNER

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